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Governor Christie Sends Legislature Mental Health Reforms to Address Violence

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MORE THAN REFORM "IN NAME ONLY" - Governor Christie has consistently stated that we must focus on what actually works to reduce violence in our society and not just what is politically popular or sounds good in name only. Evaluating gun control measures is just one piece of a complex issue that requires a comprehensive approach that seeks to address the root causes of violence. Echoing this commitment, today Governor Christie is returning A2006 to the legislature with a reform plan that deals with individuals with mental illness who pose a danger to the community and directly addressing cracks in New Jersey's mental health system.

Governor Christie: "We will not settle for grandstanding reform in name only. We can insist that elected officials pass laws that will bring about meaningful change. Mass violence will not end by changing the number of bullets loaded into a gun. It will end with a serious commitment to elevating our response to mental illness, a declaration that we will not let our discomfort with this disease threaten our children, our families, and our communities. It will end by taking seriously our duty to incarcerate violent criminals, not by criminalizing the conduct of law abiding citizens to score political points. I am ready to lead that fight."

In January 2013, Governor Christie was clear about the need to be the "grown-ups on this issue:"

Governor Christie: "We cannot and we should not let emotion guide our actions. We cannot let empty rhetoric, fear, division, and politics, along with the twenty-four hour media cycle take hold of this conversation and the things we must do to fundamentally deal with the very real problems we're facing in our homes, in our schools, in our state, and in our country."

GOVERNOR CHRISTIE'S REFORMS WILL ACTUALLY ADDRESS VIOLENCE BY FIXING CRITICAL SHORTCOMINGS AND CRACKS IN THE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM:

Improve Treatment for Individuals in Crisis with New Standards for Involuntary Commitment. Under current law, New Jersey uses one standard for involuntary inpatient and outpatient commitment: whether the individual's mental illness causes the person to be dangerous and the person is unwilling to accept treatment voluntarily. Under the Governor's proposed reforms, a new standard for involuntary commitment will be created to include individuals who are not currently dangerous but whose mental illness, if untreated, could deteriorate to the point of harm, and treats potentially dangerous mental illnesses different from other cognitive disabilities to ensure they are treated appropriately.

Improve Standards for Involuntary Outpatient Treatment. The Governor's changes will amend current law to eliminate the concerns raised by clinicians and courts regarding what factors should be considered when recommending involuntary outpatient treatment. Under the proposal, individuals would now be evaluated based on a history of lack of compliance with treatment; acts of serious violent behavior to self or others; threats or attempts at harm within the past forty-eight months; or unwillingness to voluntarily comply with treatment because of a mental illness. These new standards provide predictable guidance for clinicians to best determine whether involuntary outpatient treatment is most appropriate to maximize use of outpatient commitment.

End the Broken Loops in Clinical Oversight. The Governor's reforms provide for a streamlined, clinician-based process allowing a patient to be transferred between commitment settings to ensure a full spectrum of treatment to address mental illness fully and appropriately.

Review Firearm Licenses After Involuntary Commitment. The Governor's reforms amend current law to provide that a person who has been involuntarily committed to mental health treatment should provide adequate medical evidence to a court to obtain a firearms purchaser identification card or handgun purchase permit.

Expand Crisis Training for First Responders. The Governor's reforms will also mandate new training programs for first responders to educate those most likely to encounter persons in crisis with modern techniques for de-escalation and, whenever necessary, steps for referral for mental health screening and treatment.

GOVERNOR CHRISTIE HAS PUT SOLUTIONS BEFORE POLITICS: Today's action is consistent with Governor Christie's comprehensive, multi-pronged approach. In April 2013, Governor Christie, utilizing recommendations from the bipartisan NJ Safe Taskforce, first unveiled a comprehensive and sensible plan aimed at violence control. These proposals include reforms to impose mandatory minimum sentences for illegal gun possession, stringent sentences for firearms trafficking, and new guidelines to target and treat mental illness.

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Instead of acting on these reforms, the legislature continues to pass ill-conceived bills in an attempt to drive an emotional, political agenda. More than one year later, and despite no vocal opposition to these measures, the Governor's proposals to fix critical aspects of our criminal justice and mental health systems languish unconsidered by the legislature and unavailable to law enforcement and mental health professionals.

A copy of the Governor's recommended changes to A2006 can be found in the attached PDF.

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